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ABSTRACT

With evidence supporting the belief that as a way of decreasing errors sentence combining offers a number of advantages for developmental writing students, a college composition instructor gave 19 developmental writing students five weeks of concentrated sentence combining study with no other instruction or writing practice. The sessions concentrated on the structures used in the students' placement essays, and punctuation was integrated into the teaching of each structure. During the first week of the class, students completed a series of exercises, two of which were paragraphs composed by the students and two of which were prepared exercises. The passages were evaluated according to four main categories: garbled construction, sentence boundary errors, comma errors, and semicolon errors. At the end of the sessions, the initial exercises were returned to the students to proofread and revise according to the techniques they had studied. They also wrote a paragraph with the same instructions as one of the two earlier writing assignments. The results of the proofreading were positive, with a decline in all kinds of errors, particularly in garbled sentences. To determine whether this proofreading ability had carried over to their writing, the pretest and posttest writing samples were compared, showing a similar reduction in errors and indicating that sentence combining can be an incisive proofreading tool for the developmental writer. (HTH)

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Sentence Combining: An Incisive Tool for Proofreading

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With the current cutbacks in higher education, teachers of developmental English must not only meet the needs of their students, but defend their courses against opponents of remediation on the college level. One defense is to provide evidence of success in preparing students to enter into and survive in the mainstream within a semester or two. To serve these purposes, the developmental teacher must learn to deal effectively with what Mina Shaughnessy calls the "chaos of error"[1] that characterizes developmental writing.

How best to approach errors in developmental writing is a fuzzy issue. Traditional approaches—rules, exercises, drills, tests, etc.—are often demoralizing to the student whose test grades show relatively little learning taking place and whose papers, even when improved, continue to demand heavy marking of varied and seemingly unrelated errors.

The worth of sentence combining as a means of approaching these problems has been questionable. Suggesting that the usefulness of sentence combining varies according to the ability of the student, Hake and Williams conclude that sentence combining should be taught "only when a student

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is ready for it, only when he is already a competent writer or ready to become one."[2] A number of studies support the same conclusion, but other evidence suggests that sentence combining not only benefits students of lower ability, but, as Janet Ross determines, "'will effect greater change in writing [for them], at least as far as complexity of sentence structure is concerned,'"[3] than it will for the competent student.

Though achieving syntactic maturity is desirable, a more vital issue for the developmental writer is incidence of errors. While there exists some evidence of a decline in conventional errors for the competent student as a result of sentence combining, it is generally thought that even this competent student is likely to increase errors as he increases the length of the T-unit (Kerek, Perceptual, p. 1074). What these studies portend for the developmental writer seems obvious. Nonetheless, E. H. Schuster reports that "a group of low-ability [students] who participated in a sentence-combining program improved [not only] the quality and length of their compositions, [but], in many cases, their handwriting, mechanical skills, and grammar as well" (Kerek, Perceptual, p. 1079).

As a way of decreasing errors, sentence combining offers a number of advantages for developmental students, who have poor attitudes toward their ability to perform academically.

Not the least of these advantages is the detachment of writer from content. Comments regarding errors, accuracy, or appropriateness of expression—whether by the instructor or peers—can remain objective rather than become, or be misunderstood as, an attack on what the student has to say. In addition, when freed from the pressure of having to create content, students can give full attention to sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics and perhaps be taught to detect deviations from standard usage and syntactic boundaries.

An awareness of such errors is more important to the developmental student than increased length of T-units or syntactic maturity. In fact, placement essays written by my experimental group corroborated Hake and Williams' conclusion that incompetent writers already write longer T-units than competent ones (Hake, p. 136). One paper, for example, was composed of a single T-unit consisting of an unwieldy 49 words strung together by 8 coordinating conjunctions, a reminder of Kellogg Hunt's statement that "if sentence length is assumed to be the index of language maturity, then the child who under-punctuates the most or uses and the most will, regrettably, be credited with the greatest language maturity."[4]

Along with T-units of ample length, these placement essays contained evidence that even the developmental student commands at least a subconscious knowledge of mature syntax. Not unlike

other placement papers, one writer's essay, which consisted of only 11 T-units, contained 3 subordinate clauses, 1 relative clause, 3 participial phrases, 2 infinitive phrases, and 2 coordinated units within main clauses. With this evidence in mind as I began my sentence combining program, my goal was not to increase sentence length or maturity, but rather, as Kerek, Daiker, and Morenberg suggest, to teach students to "discover and use . . . the complex linguistic knowledge that most are unaware of holding in their heads,"[5] and, particularly, to teach them to use it with a greatly reduced incidence of the structural errors that are common to developmental writers, especially garbling errors and errors resulting from failure to recognize and punctuate sentence boundaries. With these common, but serious, errors diminished, I could then concentrate the remainder of the semester on the patterns of errors characteristic of individual students and, optimistically, on style and content.

The experimental group began with 23 students, 4 of whom had to be dropped because they stopped attending or failed to complete the testing requirements. The remaining 19 students were given 5 weeks of concentrated sentence combining study, with no other instruction or writing practice. Recognizing the inability of developmental students to move through material with the rapidity or depth of mainstreamed writers,

I ignored some of the more complex structures, such as the absolute phrase, and limited sentence combining activities to structures used, though often incorrectly, in the students' placement essays: coordination of elements within T-units; coordination of T-units; the compounding of T-units by the conjunctive adverb and semicolon; subordinate and relative clauses; and appositive, verbal, and prepositional phrases. Believing that punctuation should be viewed functionally rather than mechanically, I integrated it into my teaching of each structure. I also insisted that students learn the terminology associated with a particular structure and familiarize themselves with lists of words, such as coordinating conjunctions, subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns, etc., that might later become keys to more accurate proofreading.

To be able to test results, I devised a series of exercises to be completed by the students during the first week of classes. Two of these were paragraphs composed by the students and two others were prepared exercises—one a paragraph and the other a series of sentences—which the student proofread and corrected. Placing no marks of any kind on the papers, I evaluated them according to four main categories: garbled constructions; sentence boundary errors; comma errors; and semicolon errors.

At the end of the sentence combining sessions, these initial exercises, which remained unmarked, were returned to the students with no instructions except to proofread and revise, keeping in mind the techniques they had studied. As with the initial exercises, the proofreading and revising were done as in-class assignments, without help or suggestions from the instructor or classmates. Along with these revisions, the students wrote a paragraph which followed exactly, except for topic, the directions for one of the two earlier writing assignments.

The results of the proofreading exercises were generally positive. Though I had placed no marks on their papers, given them no direction as to number or types of problems, students made notable improvements in most areas (Table 1). Most notable was the decline of garbled sentences from 6 in the pre-test to 0 in the post-test, a 100% decrease. Though comma splices showed only a 21% decrease, from 29 to 23 errors, the fragment, which had appeared 36 times in the pre-test, decreased to 25 occurrences, or by 31%, and the fused sentence, decreasing from 15 to 5 occurrences, showed an impressive 67% decline. Total improvement in sentence boundary errors was 34%, as students reduced errors from 80 in the pre-test to 53 in the post-test, a reduction made more impressive by the fact that of the 19 students studied, 8, or 42%, were repeating

developmental English, and a ninth student had previously failed the mainstream freshman course. Moreover, the post-test had been conducted after only five weeks of sentence combining rather than after an entire semester.

Punctuation studies did not yield such positive results. Comma errors, which decreased from 241 to 207, or 14%, remained abundant, though instead of an indiscriminate scattering of the comma throughout the paper, many of the comma errors in the post-test seemed to result from poor decision-making in placing commas with structures we had studied. Students actually increased their incidence of semicolon errors by a disappointing 76%, from 4 to 17 occurrences, confirming Mina Shaughnessy's conclusion that the semicolon becomes an "epidemic" when first introduced (Shaughnessy, p. 23) and suggesting that developmental students may not be ready for semicolon study.

Except for the semicolon and possibly the comma, students had indeed improved their ability to proofread as a result of this five weeks of sentence combining, but another matter was yet to be decided. To determine whether this proofreading ability had carried over to their writing, I compared the first pre-test writing sample to the paragraph written at the time of the post-test (Table 2). In this comparison, the overall reduction in sentence boundary errors, from 32 to 20, was 38%, close to the 34% of the other study. Again the least

advance came in the case of the comma splice, which showed a reduction from 17 to 13 errors, or 24%. The fused sentence was reduced from 7 to 4 errors, or 43%, and the fragment from 8 to 3 errors, or 63%. Appearing 6 times in the pre-test sample, garbled sentences disappeared entirely in the post-test. Reduction of comma errors was more significant this time, with a decrease from 87 to 46 errors, or 47%. Though insignificant after the earlier figures, the incidence of semicolon errors was reduced from 2 to 0.

While students varied in the degree of improvement, it is worthwhile to note the sorts of changes that took place by referring to the results for one student, who was about average in capability for the group. The pre-test writing sample contained 21 errors in 6 main categories: 3 garbled sentences, 1 fragment, 5 verb errors, 5 wrong forms of words, 4 spelling errors, and 3 comma errors. The same paper edited at post-test time retained only 1 spelling error, 2 comma errors, and 1 semicolon error. The post-test writing sample contained 5 verb errors, 2 wrong forms of words, and 2 comma errors. Though verb errors remained high, the student had clearly reduced both the variety and the number of errors. Especially notable was the absence in both post-test results of any sentence boundary or garbling errors.

This student illustrates the validity of the program for developmental writers. The previous "chaos" had given way to a sense of pattern of the sort Mina Shaughnessy speaks of (Shaughnessy, p. 5). With the individual student's errors made more accessible by this sense of pattern, the random and illogical approach that so often characterizes the marking of developmental papers was eliminated, and both the students and I began to react more positively to their writing.

In addition, we shared a common vocabulary so that when errors did occur, we could discuss them with greater ease. For students whose writing had improved the most—and some students showed significantly greater improvement than others—the shared vocabulary became a means for discussing style, coherence, and sentence variety in their papers. Students used this new terminology, too, when discussing sentence combining exercises and writing assignments in class, to point out errors, judge the appropriateness and effectiveness of sentences, and make mature suggestions for revising. Sentence combining had made their errors more accessible to them as well as to me.

While error-counting may not determine syntactic maturity, my study nonetheless points to the usefulness of sentence combining for another purpose: as an incisive tool for proofreading by the developmental writer. But for most students,

the program resulted in improved writing quality as well. This improvement is confirmed by a comparison of one student's pre-test writing sample with the post-test revision of it. Though the word count varies by only one word (from 62 words in the pre-test to 63 in the post-test), the average length of T-units moves from 12.4 to 21 words, and there is a noticeable difference in style and organization. Through sentence combining this student came to realize that revision need not be just a correction of errors, but that it can be a reconsideration of the entire direction of the paper. In the pre-test sample the student writes,

> I like to spend my saturdays lying around the house.
> Saturday to me is a day of rest and relaxation.
> A few Saturday a month I like to spend doing things that make me feel good.
> One thing that make me feel good is, during the summer, riding my motorcycle in the country.
> I like sleeping late and watching TV on Saturday.

Revised, the paragraph reads,

> In the winter I like to spend my saturdays lying around the house and watching television, but in the summer I

like to spend my saturdays doing something that makes me feel good. One of the things that make me feel good is riding my motorcycle in the country where the air is fresh and I can just relax and take it easy.

None of these students have reached the point in their writing at which they can "just relax and take it easy," but they are beginning to do something that makes them and me "feel good."

Table 1. Error Reduction in Proofreading Exercises

Types of Errors	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Percentage Improvement	
Sentence Boundary	80	53	34%	
Fragment	36	25	31%	
Fused Sentence	15	5	67%	
Comma Splice	29	23	21%	
Garbled Sentence	6	0	100%	
Comma	241	207	14%	
Semicolon	4	17	76%	Increase in Errors

Table 2. Error Reduction in Writing Samples

Types of Errors	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Percentage Improvement
Sentence Boundary	32	20	38%
Fragment	8	3	63%
Fused Sentence	7	4	43%
Comma Splice	17	13	24%
Garbled Sentence	6	0	100%
Comma	87	46	47%
Semicolon	2	0	100%

Notes

[1]Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 5.

[2]Rosemary Hake and Joseph M. Williams, "Sentence Expanding: Not Can, or How, but When," in Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing, Selected Papers from the Miami University Conference, Oxford, Ohio, October 27-28, 1978, ed. Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg, Studies in Contemporary Language, No. 3 (Akron, Ohio: Departments of English, University of Akron and University of Central Arkansas, 1979), p. 139.

[3]Andrew Kerek, Donald A. Daiker, and Max Morenberg, "Sentence Combining and College Composition," Perceptual and Motor Skills, V51 (1980), 1079.

[4]Kellogg W. Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels, NCTE Research Report, No. 3 (Champaign, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965), p. 8.

[5]Andrew Kerek, Donald A. Daiker, and Max Morenberg, "The Effects of Intensive Sentence Combining on the Writing Ability of College Freshmen," in Linguistics, Stylistics, and the Teaching of Composition, ed. Donald McQuade, Studies in Contemporary Language, No. 2 (Akron, Ohio: Department of English, University of Akron, 1979), p. 87.

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